

TREASURED *Truffles*

The world's most elusive, edible decadence

DAVID LETTERMAN has joked about them. *Gossip Girl*'s Serena van der Woodsen (Blake Lively) has devoured them. *The Amazing Race* should make contestants scavenge for them. Here's a look at mushrooms that yield a special magic.
— Mona Buehler

IT'S A LATE AUTUMN afternoon in Barbaresco, Italy, and Signore Renato Agnello, his canine companion, Gigi, and a small group of travelers slip through the Nebbiolo grapevines and into the woods. Nose to the ground, the hound expertly navigates the dank woodland, sniffing

out oak, poplar and hazelnut tree trunks. Rooting for the telltale musk, Gigi suddenly stops and begins frantically pawing at the foliage-carpeted floor.

Get travel tips for Piedmont and the annual Alba White Truffle Fair at piemonteitalia.eu.

In one swift movement, Agnello kneels, pushes her muzzle away and deftly digs with his trusty zappino. Minutes later, he produces a small white tartufi and everyone cheers in delight.

Renato Agnello is a renowned trifolau, or truffle hunter, who has been foraging for the precious black and white fungi for 67 years. Truffles—which look like lumpy, wart-warped potatoes and have the pungent odor of sweaty socks—taste far better than they look (and smell!).



WHERE TO STAY



YOU WANT:
Beautiful and boutique

GO FOR:
Rocche Costamagna Art Suites in La Morra.
rocchecostamagna.it

YOU WANT:
Serenity and sophistication

GO FOR:
Il Boscareto Resort & Spa in Serralunga d'Alba.
ilboscaretoresort.it

YOU WANT:
Trendy and offbeat

GO FOR:
Hotel NH Santo Stefano in Turin.
nh-hotels.com

YOU WANT:
Classic and chic

GO FOR:
Relais San Maurizio in Santo Stefano Belbo.
relaisanmaurizio.it

The prized white truffle tartufo bianco—or, as the locals call them, “white gold” and “diamonds of the kitchen”—are one of the world’s most expensive natural foods and can fetch upward of 3,000 euro (\$4,000) per kilogram. (The record auction price: \$330,000 for 3.3 pounds.). These precious tubers grow only in select spots in Europe, most famously among the rolling hills of Alba and Asti in Italy’s Piedmont region. Here the earth is rich in clay and calcium, perfect for sprouting the spore. “In Alba, we are very lucky because the soil cannot be imitated or reproduced; you won’t find as good a soil as right here,” explains Agnello.

Robert Curry at Michelin-starred Auberge du Soleil in Napa Valley agrees. Top chefs and restaurants are just as passionate about these funky fungi and have become the truffle trade’s best customers. “Truffles are very special because they are a wild, foraged product,” says Curry. “The good ones are not only rare but have a flavor that is unlike anything else. Truffles are addictive, sexy and sensual.” His favorite way to prepare the wild mushrooms?



Truffle hunter Renato Agnello and his uncanny canine, Gigi.

Not cooking them at all. “Truffles are best as a finishing touch to a dish,” explains Curry. “I prefer to just warm them through and add them at the last moment to a dish, using them as you would a garnish. I think truffles are best raw so you can get the most out of the flavor.”

At home, the executive chef eats his truffles the same way Agnello does: simply shaved over organic eggs, served poached, baked or scrambled. But at \$300-plus a plate, restaurant patrons expect a little more flair with their fungi. When Auberge du Soleil gets its sacred Italian delicacy shipment in late November, white truffles headline the award-winning menu for the next month.

The best truffles appear October through January and thrive deep in the moist earth, which makes finding the fungus no small feat, unless you have a nose for morels like Gigi. This adorable 4-year-old hound is the best truffle hunter Agnello has ever had. Case in point—the white truffle she unearthed was quite the unexpected find this early in the season. The search was a simulated

hunt for the amusement of tourists, and any truffles Gigi was supposed to find were planted (less expensive) black ones. But the pooch was just too good.

Normally, real truffle hunting takes place under the cover of darkness in the middle of the night—and without a chatty entourage. Dogs are less distracted pre-dawn, and since the truffle trade is such competitive business, trifulau keep their ‘shroom-scavenging spots under wraps.

Like many Piedmontese, Agnello has truffle hunting in his blood. At just 6 years old, he went on the first hunt with his papa, and he’s never looked back. “I have a sickness. I must be mad,” he jokes. Now 73, he still forages in the forest a few times a week and teaches his 13-year-old granddaughter the tradition. “I don’t do this for money, I do this for love.”



Prized white truffles are one of the world’s most expensive foods.

Scavenger for more scrumptious truffle recipes at CHOW.com

CHOW
FOOD. DRINK. FUN.

Dayboat Scallops with White Truffles, Sunchokes and Hazelnuts

by Robert Curry, executive chef at Auberge du Soleil

Serves 4, adapted for home cooking

INGREDIENTS:

3 sunchokes, small dice, braised in chicken stock and butter
4 pearl onions, peeled, braised in chicken stock and butter
1 ounce chicken stock
1½ tablespoons butter
½ bunch chives, chopped
2 tablespoons clarified butter or grapeseed oil
4 Dayboat sea scallops
1 white truffle, julienned
12 hazelnuts, toasted and roughly chopped

12 bunches hydroponic mache
12 sunflower sprouts
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a small pan place braised sunchokes and pearl onions, chicken stock and ½ tablespoon butter. Reduce until sunchokes and onions are glazed, add chopped chives, season with salt and pepper.



2. Heat a sauté pan and add clarified butter. Season scallops on both sides with salt and pepper. Sear scallops in a hot pan until golden. Turn scallops, add 1 tablespoon of butter, and baste until scallops are cooked.

3. Divide the sunchokes and onions among four plates and place one scallop on each plate. Garnish with white truffle, hazelnuts, mache and sunflower sprouts.